



# Using Verbal De-Escalation

Adapted with permission from material developed by **Risk Management Services,**  
**Northeast Washington Educational Service District 101**

# How do you know when you are being personally or physically threatened?

- You will know it when it happens to you.
- You will “feel” it.
- Trust your instincts



# What is Verbal De-escalation?

- **Verbal De-escalation** is what we use during a potentially dangerous, or threatening, situation in an attempt to prevent a person from causing harm to us, themselves or others.
- Without specialized training, we should **never** consider the use of **physical force**.
- Verbal De-escalation consists of **tactics** to help limit the number of staff who might be injured on the job.



# Physical Force

- Use of physical force is **NEVER** recommended.
- Physical force would only be used as a **last resort** to prevent injury to yourself or to another person.
- Use of physical force usually results in someone **(you?)** getting hurt.



# This information **WILL** teach you:

- **Verbal De-escalation tactics** that are non-physical skills used to prevent a potentially dangerous situation from escalating into a physical confrontation or injury.



# Verbal De-escalation Tactics

- **Some Tactics are:**
  - Simply listening
  - Distracting the other person
  - Re-focusing the other person on something positive
  - Changing the subject
  - Use humor (sparingly) to lighten the mood (be very careful with this!)
  - Motivating the other person
  - Empathizing with the other person
  - Giving choices
  - Setting limits



# De-escalating Effectively

- To verbally de-escalate another person, you must open as many clear lines of communication as possible.
- Both you and the other person must listen to each other and have no barriers.
- **Barriers to Communication** are the things that keep the meaning of what is being said from being heard.
- **Communication Barriers:**
  - Pre-judging
  - Not Listening
  - Criticizing
  - Name-Calling
  - Engaging in Power Struggles
  - Ordering
  - Threatening
  - Minimizing
  - Arguing



# De-escalating Positively

- **Use positive and helpful statements such as:**
  - “I want to help you!”
  - “Please tell me more so I better understand how to help you.”
  - “Let’s call Mr. Smith ... I know he would be able to help with this...”
  - “Ms. Jones handles this for our district, let’s ask her what she thinks about this situation ... She is always willing to help!”
- **Put yourself on his/her side of finding a solution to the problem.**





# Listening

- **Three Main Listening Skills:**
  - **Attending**: Giving your physical (and mental) attention to another person.
  - **Following**: Making sure you are engaged by using eye contact. Use un-intrusive gestures (such as nodding of your head, saying okay or asking an infrequent question.)
  - **Reflecting**: Paraphrasing and reflecting, using the feelings of the other person. (empathy)
- **Listen when you are “listening.”**
  - No other activities when listening.
  - Multi-tasking is not good when you are listening.



# Be an empathic listener

- Do **NOT** be judgmental.
- Do **NOT** ignore the person or pretend to be paying attention.
- Listen to what the person is really saying.
- Re-state the message.
- Clarify the message.
- Repeat the message.
- Be empathetic!
- Validate -- “I understand why...” (Not in agreement with...)
- Try to establish rapport with the other person.



# Intro to Body Language

- 80% -- 90% of our communication is non-verbal. It is very important to be able to identify exactly what **we** are communicating to others non-verbally.
- You may be trying to de-escalate the situation by talking to the other person, but **your body language** may be showing a willingness to get physical.
- It is also important that we **recognize and understand** the non-verbal cues from another person who has the potential of escalating.



# Body Language

- When people are angry, they sometimes do not “listen” to the words that are being said.
- Remember the difference between “hearing” and “listening.”
- Often, they do “see” and react to what you are “saying” with your body language.
- You must always be very careful with the message you are sending!



# Body Language

- Finger pointing may seem accusing or threatening.
- Shoulder shrugging may seem uncaring or unknowing.
- Rigid walking may seem unyielding or challenging.
- Jaw set with clenched teeth shows you are not open- minded to listening to his/her side of the story.
- A natural smile is good. A fake smile can aggravate the situation.
- Use slow and deliberate movements -- quick actions may surprise or scare the other person.



# Body Language -- Eyes

- One eyebrow raised = “sternness”
- Eyes open wide = “surprise”
- A hard stare = “threatening gesture”
- Closing eyes longer than normal = “I’m not listening” and/or **“Change your message!”**  
(This may be a warning that you are unintentionally escalating the situation!)



# Personal Space

- Invasion or encroachment of personal space tends to heighten or escalate anxiety.
- Note: Personal space is usually 1.5 to 3 feet (far enough away so you cannot be hit or kicked.)
- Do not touch a hostile person -- they might interpret that as an aggressive action.
- Keep your hands visible at all times -- you do not want the other person to misinterpret your physical actions.



# Challenging Posture

**Challenging postures that tend to threaten another person and escalate any situation include:**

- **Face to face**
- **Nose to nose**
- **Toe to toe**
- **Eyeball to eyeball**
- **Touching**
- **Finger pointing**





# Protect yourself at all times

- While de-escalating another person, you want to be in a non-threatening, non-challenging and **self-protecting** position.
- Slightly more than a leg's length away, on an angle and off to the side of the other person.
- Stay far enough away that the other person cannot hit, kick or grab you.



# Use of your voice

- **Tone**
- **Volume**
- **Rate of speech**
- **Inflection of voice**



# Tone of your voice


- A **lowered** voice level may set a tone of anger which could create fear or challenges.
- A **raised** voice may set a tone of anticipation or uncertainty which may promote excitement or disruption.
- Speak **slowly** -- This is usually interpreted as soothing.
- A **controlled** voice is one of calm and firmness which promotes confidence in both parties.
- **Humor** may unintentionally offend someone and escalate the situation. -- Use humor sparingly and always direct humor toward yourself. (Be very careful when attempting humor in this type of situation!)
- Always be **respectful** to the other person.
- Using **“please”** and **“thank-you”** -- **“Mr”** or **“Ms”** indicates respect.



# “Inflection of voice” examples:

What do these words mean?

“I didn’t say you were stupid.”

- I didn’t say you were stupid.  
(Your brother said it!)
  - I didn’t **say** you were stupid.  
(But I did write it on the bulletin board!)
  - I didn’t say **you** were stupid.  
(I said your brother was stupid)
  - I didn’t say you were **stupid**.  
(I said you were a complete idiot.)
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# Tips

- **Remain calm -- Listen - really listen!**
- **Avoid overreaction.**
- **Validate! “I understand why you might be upset.” (This does not indicate that you agree with them.)**
- **Remove onlookers -- or relocate to a safer place. (Onlookers can become either “cheerleaders” or additional victims.) Send an onlooker for help.**
- **Watch for non-verbal clues or threats.**
- **Bring in another trained person to assist whenever possible.**
- **There is less chance of aggressive behavior if two people are talking to one person.**



# Ask for Help!

- Alert someone else as soon as possible. (No help will arrive until someone else knows your situation. Until then, you are all alone.)
- Two heads are always better than one.
- There is safety in numbers.
- It will be beneficial to have a witness, if the situation deteriorates and someone is injured.



# Notification and Follow-up

- Always report minor situations.
- Minor situations can be a “cry for help” and/or “warning signs” of bigger things to come!
- Minor situations can lead to major situations.
- After any confrontation, advise or direct the person to counseling, if possible.
- Always document every threatening event.
- Documentation will help all parties when evaluating re-occurring events.



# Things **NOT** to do!

- Avoid becoming emotionally involved -- control your emotions at all times.
- Avoid engaging in power struggles.
- Avoid becoming ridged in your process.
- Avoid telling the other person that you “know how he or she feels.”
- Avoid raising your voice, cussing, making threats, and giving ultimatums or demands.
- Avoid aggressive language, including body language.
- Do not attempt to intimidate a hostile person.





# Let's do an Exercise!

- Break into groups of two.
- One person acts as the aggressor and the other attempts to verbally de-escalate him/her.
- Practice what we learned today.
  - **Scenario #1** -- You are an angry person who's son was suspended for fighting. You believe it was not his fault - "he was just defending himself." The other person is the principal (teacher, secretary, coach, etc). The principal is alone when the angry parent approaches.
  - **Scenario #2** -- You are a first year female teacher working alone in your H.S. classroom after school. An 18 yr. old football player, who just flunked your mid-term exam and became "ineligible," comes in and threatens you.



# Review

- If you find yourself in a threatening situation, remember:
  - Listen -- Hear the real “message” and repeat it back with “understanding!”
  - Distract the other person, if possible.
  - Change the subject.
  - Try to re-focus him/her on something positive.
  - Use humor (sparingly) to lighten the mood.
  - Motivate him/her to seek help.
  - Empathize!
  - Give choices.
  - Set limits.



# Not the End...

**After your personal safety is secured, there are several other steps that must be taken:**

- Intervention must occur to end the situation, if that has not yet occurred. This may be accomplished by supervisors, security or police, depending on the circumstances. Make sure your appropriate chain of command has all of the facts.
- You should receive medical treatment for any physical injuries.
- Counseling for post-traumatic stress and fear resulting from the incident may be appropriate.
- KEAP can conduct a de-briefing session with involved staff.
- Look at steps to be taken to prevent other similar situations from occurring in the future.

